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The 10th Mountain Division

Soldiers Who Loved to Ski

Training with the 10th Mountain Division in Colorado

Trish Anderton



THE MIDWINTER AIR ON COLORADO'S MOUNT DEMOCRAT WAS thin and cold. A line of skiers in white military garb paused at the edge of a couloir near the summit of the 14,000-footer. At the head of the party, U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Bill Hackett probed at the crust of snow. Judging it safe, he started across.

But he'd judged wrong. Moments later, the top layer of snow broke away under his weight. Luckily, the man behind him had extraordinary reflexes. Bud Winter threw himself to the ground, grabbed a large rock with one hand, and extended his ski pole with the other.

"Grab the pole!" he yelled. Hackett did, and somehow hung on while snow avalanched from under him and crashed 2,500 feet down the slope. Nobody was hurt. Hackett picked himself up, shook off the snow—and his near-death experience—and the group went on to finish its exercise.

It was just another day at work for the World War II-era "soldiers on skis"—the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division.

Soldiers Out of Skiers

The 10th Mountain was unlike any U.S. military division before or since. It was the only one whose soldiers were recruited by a private organization, the National Ski Patrol. It was the only division that asked recruits to submit three letters attesting to their character—and skiing ability.

The inspiration for America's soldiers on skis came, perhaps not surprisingly, from Finland. As Charles J. Sanders writes in his 10th Mountain history, *The Boys of Winter* (University Press of Colorado, 2005), heavily outnumbered Finnish ski troops made an indelible impression on the world after the Soviet Union invaded in 1939.

"For nearly four months, Finnish soldiers in white camouflage uniforms kept the Soviets at bay," Sanders writes. "Using guerrilla tactics, the Finns ambushed Russian units and blew up convoys before escaping back into the snowy forests on skis. Though finally forced to surrender in March 1940, the Finns succeeded in destroying several Soviet divisions, dramatically illustrating the wartime value of ski troops in cold-weather terrain."

Germany, Austria, and Italy already had mountain troops. National Ski Patrol director Charles Minot "Minnie" Dole was alarmed that the United

Franz Alt (left) and a fellow soldier at Camp Hale. COURTESY OF JIM ALT AND ANNICE ALT

States had none. He began scheduling meetings with anyone who would listen, offering to help organize a mountain unit for the United States.

By late 1941, Dole's crusade was gaining traction. He succeeded in convincing Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall to let Dole form a regiment at Fort Lewis, near Seattle.

Dole was convinced it would be easier to make "soldiers out of skiers than skiers out of soldiers." And the skiers he recruited were some of the best in the world. They included famed Swiss mountaineer Peter Gabriel, Olympian Robert Livermore, Paul Petzoldt (a member of the first American team to attempt K2), ski jumping champ Torger Tøkle, and former slalom champ Friedl Pfeifer.

The word got out: Volunteers were needed for an elite mountain unit. University of Chicago student Robert B. Ellis, who had learned to ski as a child in Switzerland, was among those "seduced" by the breathless media coverage.

"I was still naïve and taken in by news stories depicting tan fellows, dramatically draped in white camouflage, climbing sheer rock cliffs or skiing down sunlit trails in defense of their country," he wrote in his memoir, *See Naples and Die* (McFarland, 1996).

Late in 1942, the Army opened Camp Hale high in the Pando Valley of the Colorado Rockies. Hale featured housing for 15,000 trainees, plus a ski center, rock- and ice-climbing walls, and stables for pack mules. Ellis and the others poured in from around the country by train. Camp Hale was where the 10th Mountain Division took shape, and where it faced some of its most difficult days.

Not a Pretty Sight

"Its streets are rivers of mud. Its parade ground is a sea of the same," the *Denver Post* wrote not long after Camp Hale opened. The new Mountain Training Center, it concluded, was "not a pretty sight to see these spring days."

But mud was not the only challenge at what was (of course) quickly dubbed Camp Hell. The Pando Valley had plenty of mountain peaks and plenty of snow—upward of 13 feet per year, according to Army estimates. It was sorely lacking in pretty much everything else—such as human comforts.

At 9,300 feet, the mountain air was thin. It was so thin, in fact, that a flock of carrier pigeons sent by the Army for training couldn't fly very far in it. The

soldiers had them carry messages across camp by foot instead, “like miniature Western Union boys,” Sanders writes.

Coal stoves and coal-burning trains did their best to thicken the air. The valley trapped smog, and soon men were falling ill with a chronic cough known as the “Pando Hack.” Some developed serious lung infections that hospitalized them for weeks.

The camp routine was exhausting. A typical day started at 5:30 A.M. and might include marching, calisthenics, foxhole digging, mountain climbing, marksmanship, military drill, or skiing—often while carrying the infamous 70-pound packs.

“A man fell over in ranks the other day—flat on his face,” Ellis wrote in a letter home. “You see or hear of this happening almost every day. Men faint or collapse very suddenly and the hospital is crowded. Fifty-seven men out of our company of 207 are in the hospital right now.”

The heavy, clunky gear of that era didn’t help. The skis, for example, were steel-edged hickory planks, a minimum of seven feet long (backcountry skis today are often six feet or less).

“They were pretty heavy and we’d have no wax on the darn things,” one vet recalled decades later. “In the spring when it was warm we’d ski all day on them and they’d be like a rocking chair at the end of day. So we’d have to take the tails and tie them on one side of a tree—you’d fold them around the tree and tape the tips so in the morning there’d be some camber left and they were skiable again.”

The “bear-trap” bindings consisted of a metal toe clip that attached the boot to the ski, paired with a strap across the toes to keep the boot from coming out. A metal cable stretched around the back of the heel. You could leave the heel free for cross-country skiing, or put the cable under metal clips to hold it down for downhill skiing.

That heel-down position provided greater control, but what it didn’t provide was any kind of safety release. Hence the term *bear-trap*: Once the bindings had you in their grip, they didn’t let go, even if you were cartwheeling down the mountain in a free-fall.

And even with the heels down, controlling the skis wasn’t so easy: To a modern skier accustomed to snug plastic boots, the squishy leather Army-issue ankle boots would feel about as stiff as a pile of mashed potatoes.

The fabrics left something to be desired, too. The tents didn’t “breathe,” so ice collected on the inside walls at night. A soldier who bumped his head

on the tent ceiling in the morning would bring a rain of ice down on everyone's heads.

Some men went to extreme lengths to escape the harsh conditions. Ellis recalls one soldier who was bucking for a mental health discharge. He would "strip naked in the open at bedtime," Ellis writes, "hang all his clothes carefully from nearby tree limbs, place his boots and socks just outside the opening to his tent, and climb nude into his sleeping bag. In the morning—and we usually rose well before dawn—he had the unenviable task of emerging bare-assed and barefoot from his tent and trying to get into icy clothing which had turned stiff as a board during the night."

The man eventually disappeared, Ellis adds, but "to our great disappointment, we never learned whether it had all been an act or not."

The Damnedest Thing

What's surprising is how many soldiers not only survived in these conditions; they thrived in them. For many Camp Hale residents, the perfect end to a week of hiking and skiing was a weekend of hiking and skiing.

"My God, half of the son of a guns in the outfit would rather go climb some rock than go down to town and look for booze and broads," 10th Mountain veteran Francis Sargent, who went on to become governor of Massachusetts, told *Sports Illustrated* in 1971. "I remember thinking it was the damnedest thing for soldiers to act like that."

Fellow veteran Bill Bowerman put it more politely. "It was not an army," he said. "It was a fraternity. It was a brotherhood of outdoorsmen."

Franz Alt was one of those outdoorsmen. Alt was born in Vienna. He came to the United States "just after the Nazis walked into Austria," according to his widow, Annice Alt, who shared some of his papers with *Appalachia*. Alt took notes of his weekend hikes, some of which can only be described as massive slogs. On April 22, 1944, for example, he set out, apparently by himself, to some log cabins to spend the night. He did not take skis. "Extremely deep snow, a few times tempts me to turn back," he noted, but he didn't turn back.

The next morning he set out from the cabins at 7 A.M. and hiked up Sugarloaf Mountain. Then he worked his way across ridges and through passes to Jacque Peak, where he also summited. "Bad weather, snowfall and strong wind, until here," he wrote. "On way back weather gets better." That was lucky because he still had another five hours to go: three to climb 12,718-foot Elk Mountain, and two to get back to camp, where he arrived at 8:30 P.M.

On another weekend in late May, he set out with a fellow soldier to climb two 14,000-footers, Mounts Massive and Elbert. After a half-day of climbing, they slept “uncomfortably on sloping rocks under an overhang.” Arising bright and early at 5:20, they skied all the way down Massive, then made their way to Elbert and climbed it, carrying their skis much of the way. They skied down and walked out, finishing at 11:30 P.M.—an 18-hour day.

Just another weekend in the 10th Mountain Division.

As Bad as D-Series

The culmination of all the training at Camp Hale was D-Series, a massive maneuver that sent some 12,000 men into the mountains around Pando in March 1944. It was a chance to show the Army brass what the division could do. An official Army report later called it “the most grueling training test ever given to any U.S. Army division.”

The snow was deeper than usual that spring. Men slogged up mountains for hours, practicing attacks and flanking maneuvers, remaining on alert status for days at a time. Communications systems broke down and whole battalions got lost. Many men went hungry because the mule teams got stuck in deep drifts and couldn’t get supplies out to them.

For much of the time, fires were not allowed, and the troops slept out under the stars in their sleeping bags. This could be an unnerving experience when snow fell overnight.

“I got up one morning early and thought everyone had left. I was real scared,” one veteran recalled. On closer inspection, he saw the tiny holes in the snow that had formed around each man’s nostrils. He felt a rush of relief: “Oh my god, they’re still here!”

Sleeping in the snow claimed a lot of casualties. On one night alone, more than 100 men had to be evacuated for frostbite. Ellis lost 17 pounds. “Along with other discomforts, my back and shoulders broke out with sores, my fingers cracked at the ends, my ears were frozen once, etc.,” he wrote. “I’ve been tired many times but never so completely washed out in every way.”

Later on, when the 10th Mountain faced combat in Italy, the men liked to say, “If this gets any worse, it’ll be as bad as D-Series.”

Riva Ridge and Beyond

Ironically, the soldiers on skis didn't get to use their skis much in the war. The winter of 1944–1945 wasn't very snowy in Italy, where the 10th was called on to reclaim the high grounds of the Apennine Mountains and drive the Nazis north to the Po Valley. A highlight of the campaign was the daring nighttime climb up Riva Ridge, a steep rock face covered in ice and snow, which the Germans considered impossible to scale. The 10th climbed the ridge in February 1945, and they held it despite a withering counterattack.

By April, they were crossing the Po River. In May, the German army in Italy surrendered. The division had fought in Europe for four months, sustaining 975 deaths and nearly 4,000 injuries.

The capture of Riva Ridge, in particular, validated the importance of trained mountain troops. But it was only the beginning of the contribution that the 10th Mountain soldiers would make with their high-altitude skills.

Back in the United States after the war, veterans of the division started ski resorts at Aspen, Vail, and Stowe, and played key roles in the burgeoning ski industry across the nation. Tenth Mountain vets founded the National Outdoor Leadership School and the League of Conservation Voters, and served in top positions at scores of outdoor and conservation organizations. Some 30 members have been inducted in the U.S. Ski Hall of Fame.

“We wanted to teach the country to ski. And we did,” veteran Dick Wilson told the *New York Times* in 2006.

One of the soldiers on skis also founded the 10th Mountain Division Memorial Hut System, a network of 34 backcountry huts in the Rockies on land where the division trained. If you want to honor the 10th Mountain Division and its legacy, perhaps the best way is to ski, hike, or bike these beautiful and still-remote trails yourself.

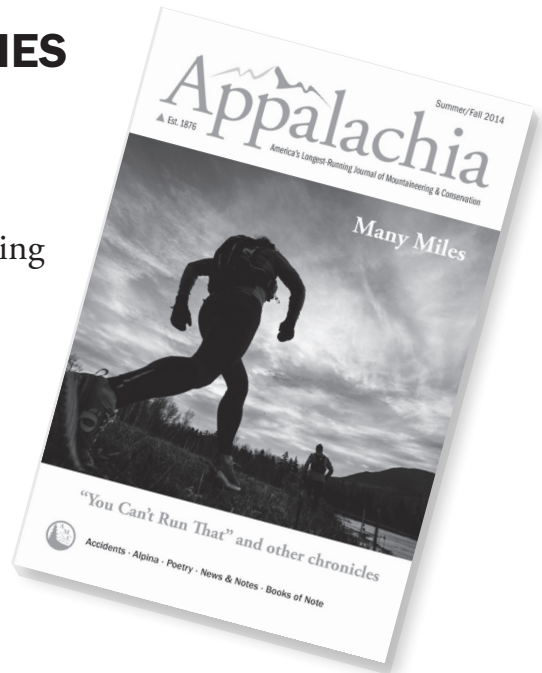
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